

Interview with Bud and Millie Cummings
in Eastham, Massachusetts

by Donald Sparrow
November 13, 1983

Q: This is an interview with Bud Cummings and Millie Cummings at their home off Nauset Road in Eastham. The date is November 13, 1983 and the interviewer is Don Sparrow. This is a follow-up on the interview with Bud earlier in July of this year.

We talked about the missing places on the transcription of the tape, and Bud wasn't able to add too much to the situation. Bud and I have discussed the interview on rum-running and neither of us can think of anything that we possibly left out. One of the other things that Bud was involved in was the reconditioning of the old windmill, and perhaps we ought to talk about that a bit. What role did you play?

Bud Cummings: Well, of course, I didn't play a very big role in it by any means. It was Bill Peter Higgins that had the job of rebuilding it and he hired me to help him. I was just a helper there. But I think one of the interesting things was that we had-- or he had-- a main shaft that was green oak. I think it was Nova Scotia, and it weighed about eighteen hundred pounds. And we had to cut two bearings on this one on either end, and they had to be

accurate. And what Bill did was to take a Model-T truck rear end, take it apart, use the two ends where you put your wheels on, and he drilled two holes, a hole in either end of the log, then inserted these axle ends in there, and this gave him a lathe.

Then he put a belt around the whole log and around what we used to call an air motor, which was one of these motors that fired every few minutes, ran very slowly.

Q: Yeah, a one lunger. Klunk! Klunk!

Cummings: Then he had a perfect lathe for this used log, and as it turned, he cut it with a set of cutting tools and chisels and got a perfect bearing.

Q: How big was this log?

Cummings: Well, it weighed eighteen hundred pounds. I can't remember just how long it was, but it was the full shaft for the windmill.

And so I helped him with that, and then-- I guess I did more standing around than anything else, but I suppose we was helping him make all the new teeth, which was very tricky, to get them so that they all came out right. Had the right number of teeth and the right size teeth.

Q: What kind of wood did you use for those teeth?

Cummings: I don't recall. It was a very hard wood and I would guess it was oak.

Q: Probably was oak, yes. We were on Nantucket recently and I visited the old windmill on Nantucket, and their's is different in that the grinding wheel is up above on the second floor, and the corn is poured into the hopper up on the second floor and then the ground corn flows down to the ground floor. But in the Eastham windmill the grinding is on the ground floor.

Cummings: It comes out underneath sometimes.

Q: I noticed that their teeth and their wheels were very, very hard and polished wood.

Cummings: They could have been a heavier wood than oak, I don't know.

Q: When was that reconditioned? Must have been early in the thirties.

Cummings: Yes, it was. It had to be. I couldn't set a date, but it was about that time.

Q: I don't know if you read my story in the CAPE CODDER about the Windmill Club. We had a little club up in the windmill. Oh, you didn't know that? Bob and Bill and--

Millie Cummings: Was that the Stamp Club?

Q: No, no, this was a Windmill Club. Fenton and Bill and Bob and Kenneth Mayo and myself were playing underneath the old windmill when it was all locked up and almost abandoned. And there were all sorts of gears and stones underneath there. And Fenton sat up

and hit his head on what was the floor and boom, the floor moved, and it was a trap door. So we went through the trap door, and we thought that it was great. Nobody knew we were in there, so that was our secret club. And way up on the top, where the shaft comes in, there's a little window there, there was a nice little area, all clean, so that was our clubhouse. We had that clubhouse for a year or so and nobody knew we were there. And we'd pick up bottles and cash them in at Barton's store and buy candy bars. You know, Mr. Goodbars, they were about that long. They were only about a millimeter thick, but they were that big. And we'd store our candy bars up there, and we'd go to the library and get out books and take them into our secret clubhouse and read and eat candy bars. And we thought that was great, because none of the adults knew we were there.

Bud Cummings: That's pretty good. I never knew it.

Millie Cummings: Was that the one that was in The Summery? I just sent it to Bob.

Q: I think I gave that to you, yes.

Millie Cummings: Yes. I sent it to Bob and I heard from his wife. He doesn't write. She said he read it all and she's keeping it for his memorabilia.

Q: We had to give it up when we knew that the windmill was going to be put into operation. So we cleared out. But that was a lot of fun.

Bud Cummings: The only other thing that I remember on that windmill was that when it came time to put the main shaft in-- of course, it was big and it was heavy, and Bill Peter rigged up all these blocks and tackles and tripods and everything, for everything to work on, and everybody stood around saying it'll never work.

Finally, when he got everything all set, why, he pulled a couple of ropes and it went right up and swung into place and-- perfect.

Q: I don't know Bill Peter. Who was he-- or who is he?

Bud Cummings: That was his nickname. Bill Peter Higgins. I guess his name was-- was either Bill Higgins or had a brother maybe that was-- no. Why he was Bill Peter-- must have been somebody else--

Millie: Bill Higgins was the one that had the bowling alley down in Orleans, wasn't he?

Q: There was a Bill Higgins that ran the bowling alley.

Bud: This fellow was Bill Peter. Now it must have been one of those names that was used because the father was Bill Higgins, so they called him Bill Peter or something to differentiate between them.

Q: How did they turn the top around to position the sails?

Bud: Well, that was always turned-- used to be turned by a-- a horse would be hitched on to the bottom end of it. You know, there's a big-- like a rudder comes out on the back, and that used to be turned by a horse. I think they turn it with a jeep now.

Q: Millie Cummings, Bud's wife, has joined us and she has some memories of the rum-running days also. Why don't you go ahead.

Millie: When we first moved down here in 1929, it was like living out in the wilderness, as far as I was concerned. I'd never lived so far away, and being left alone at night was rather scary, because every night when Bud got mixed up with the rum-runners, I had to spend most of my nights alone in bed with a double-barreled shotgun, loaded both barrels. Just in case somebody came snooping around that I needed the gun for. But I found out later that everybody knew about the gun, so I didn't have any visitors. Unfortunately.
(LAUGHTER)

But finally it seems that they ran out of places to put the liquor, or else somebody was getting wise. They needed a new place to store it. So they asked about storing it in our garage, and Bud said yes. We had capacity in our old swayback garage for eight hundred cases, which came around anywhere from three or four o'clock in the morning. And delivered the cases, at which time I-- when I heard the big cars coming in, I'd get up and help unload, along with the rest of the fellows.

And although the cases were wrapped in burlap and had ears on them to handle them, they'd taken a pretty good beating by the time they got here, and there was at least one bottle broken in practically every case. So being in July, this place had the aroma of a still. I don't know whether I imagined it or not, but I thought that everybody in the whole neighborhood probably could smell it, because it was certainly pretty wild here.

So it didn't surprise me when Ernie Moore came over and told us that his father, the constable, was about to raid us, or at least his father had been told by the state police that they were going to raid us. And he offered to help us hide it.

Well, we'd had one year in the turnip business and had a lot of empty pits around here. So we hid a lot of the stuff in turnip pits and put the rest of it down near our pond in the woods. I think it was the choice things that we put in the turnip pits, because later on, when we started to put the cases of liquor back into the garage, we found that Ernie had taken his percentage out, and there never was any raid.

That was one of the few times-- or many times, I might say-- that we were outsmarted by Cape Codders. (LAUGHTER)

But when the time came for the pay-off for storing this liquor, the fellow who came down with the money-- I've forgotten how much it was, but it was a substantial amount-- tried to hold back on us. We finally told him to go ahead and hold back. We had enough liquor held back so that it wouldn't make any difference to us.

But they finally paid us for it, but we still had just about every kind of liquor you could name stashed around in turnip pits. Inasmuch as anyone who had anything to do with rum-running in those days, including the Coast Guard, always got their share. Every man who was bringing the liquor home, or to the so-called storage place, would usually manage to throw off a case or two enroute to pick up later and take home. So we were pretty well set as far as liquor was concerned for quite some time.

Q: Do you have any idea at all as to what percentage of the liquor that came off the boats was sold to a customer? Or in other words, what was the wastage or the losses en route? Sounds as though a pretty high percentage was skimmed off.

Bud: If they didn't have to dispose of it, you know, because they were chased or anything, if it was just a normal good load that came through, I suppose they must have lost twenty percent to pilfering. To use a nice word.

Millie: And breakage.

Q: Yes, breakage. Well, it might have been pretty hard to say whether it was broken or pilfered.

You told earlier a story of one of the local boys holding up somebody that was delivering the liquor. Go ahead, Millie.

Millie: He actually wasn't a local boy at the time it happened, but he had been Peck's Bad Boy of Orleans. His name was Henry Childs and he was the son of Captain Childs of the Orleans station. And there are some people still alive who remember Henry, and have some very vivid memories of things that he did as a youth. But when we met him, he must have been in his fifties. Whether he kept his father's uniform or not, we never knew, but he did have a Coast Guard uniform and a Coast Guard hat. And while liquor was being brought in at a certain place-- this was not the usual drop-- he had somehow heard of it. Went down and singlehandedly held up all this tough crowd from Boston and made them hand over their

whole load of liquor. That was the beginning of a friendship that lasted for many years. As a matter of fact, he was Richard Nickerson's grandmother's brother.

Q: But you mentioned earlier that these guys that he held up were real toughies.

Millie: Oh, yes, they certainly were, according to everything that I heard. I didn't have the pleasure of meeting them, but a lot of them were on dope. They carried guns. They wouldn't hesitate to shoot the person. Whether Henry had a gun or not, I don't know, but he-- I guess he must have.

Bud: ?

Millie: But ^{he} at least had a uniform, and they didn't know-- I think he told them that they were surrounded. They didn't know he was there singlehanded.

Q: Did you observe this, Bud?

Bud: No, I knew of it.

Q: Oh. You stayed away.

Millie: Henry told us. But Bud was on another one. Did he tell you this other one, the time that the customs gang came in here and commandeered him to go down to-- it was more or less the same place, to hold up-- I think it was the same crowd.

Bud: It was in the same general area down there.

Q: But the customs people? This is the federal agents who commandeered you?

Millie: No, no. These were the Gustin boys. They were three young boys.

Q: Oh, oh, I'm sorry. The bad guys.

Millie: Yes. They didn't look like bad guys. They were three handsome boys that I thought were boys that Bud had known when he was in school in Boston. And when Bud told me that some friends of his wanted him to go off with them, I didn't think anything about it. He didn't return for quite a while.

Bud: Spent all night.

Millie: Was the next day before I found what actually happened. They had gone down to hold up another load of liquor that didn't belong to them. I guess everyone played it on everyone else, as far as I can understand.

So they gave Bud a gun and he had to go along too, but he just kept around behind a tree and shot up in the air, so they'd think he was shooting too. (LAUGHTER)

Q: How did they persuade you to go along with them?

Bud: Well, the idea was that when they got some boys that would go, you went.

Q: Okay. You didn't ask questions.

Bud: No.

Millie: Oh, yes, they were usually hopped up.

Bud: Very friendly, but they'd just as soon shoot you as look at you.

Millie: One time Bud was in Boston and one of them came up to him and said, is there anybody you'd like to have knocked off? Anybody you don't like?

Bud: He was hopped up. It was right in Copley Square and he was looking all around, you know. "Somebody you don't like around here?"

Q: I think you told me that all three of them died an early and unnatural death.

Bud: Yes. Every one of them.

Millie: All before they were thirty years old.

Q: Any other good stories? That's a good one.

Bud: Is this thing running?

Q: Yes.

Bud: Oh, God. (LAUGHTER) Well, I think the details of that raid with the Gustin boys was kind of interesting, because we've just been talking generalities about it. But what they actually did, they came up here and they said, we know that you know where a load of liquor is coming in tonight. We want you

to go with us.

Millie: And show us.

Bud: Show us. Of course, I knew I had to go, so I took them down to this place in the Mashpee woods, which was on the beach, where this liquor was coming in.

And we waited. We only had to wait a little while. And there were two carloads-- I think there may have been three carloads of men came down, who were going to unload this liquor. They didn't know we were there. And then the liquor came in and that was all piled on the beaches. And the boats took off and the men were there and their trucks were to arrive and pick it up. And that's when we walked in and held them up. There were fourteen or fifteen of them that we held up.

Q: And how many were there of you?

Bud: Four.

Q: The three boys and yourself?

Bud: Yeah. We put them in a cottage that was there, right there, but unfortunately there was one we didn't get and he got away. And he got to a telephone somewhere in there and he called and he got hold of the head man in Boston. And a while later we heard this roaring, and we thought, ah, here come the trucks. Now all we do is hold up the trucks, make everybody load the liquor, and off we go. Well, it turned out to be two touring cars full of mad men

with sub-machineguns.

Q: So you lit out?

Bud: We lit out. Only a few shots and one fellow with us got his wrist shot, and we found out later one of the other fellows got shot quite badly in the leg. But that was all there was to it. I mean, as far as anybody getting hurt went.

So we headed for Boston with a coked-up driver. You can imagine, we had to get to Boston fast. And we got there, and I don't know how he guessed it, but Stevie guessed it, the man that owned the load, who had sent the men to get the load, didn't know whether he had the load yet or not, because he hadn't heard.

And he went right up to him, to his place of business, and hollered at him and said, we've got your liquor, what'll you pay to get it back? We'd already lost it. And he said, well, I'll give you three thousand dollars. And Stevie said, all right, we'll take three thousand. We're good guys, we won't hold you up for any more. (LAUGHTER) He got the three thousand and went off and it was about ten minutes later that the owner found out that he already owned the liquor.

Q: He must have been pretty unhappy.

Bud: Everybody was kind of on their toes for quite a while after. That's how it happened. It was goofy, the whole business.

Millie: Did you tell him about the man who was supposed to pay someone on a bridge in Bourne?

Q: Yes. The Salvation Army man got it.

Millie: Yes. He gave the payroll to the Salvation Army.

Q: What period of time were you doing this? Was it a couple of years?

Millie: No, no.

Bud: About a year, wasn't it? It sort of dribbled on and on. Maybe a couple of years.

Millie: I don't think it was that long. Seemed to me it was one long summer. It was during the late fall.

Q: But it ended when Prohibition was repealed?

Bud: Oh, yes.

Q: Which was in-- what? Yes, '33.

Bud: Because I was in there, the same more or less group. You know, a speakeasy man there, a doorman and so forth. I don't think that was in the summer, that I remember.

Millie: Well, no, that was when we decided to spend the winter in Boston.

Bud: Yes. But, I mean, the whole thing went on for probably a couple of years anyway.

Q: Was this before or after Bob and Bill came down to live with you?

Bud: Before.

Q: (At this point we got into a fairly lengthy discussion of Bob and Bill Watson, the two half-brothers, Bud's half-brothers, that lived with Bud and Millie until they graduated from high school. We talked about a lot of other things, including Bud's role in the town, when the National Seashore was being established, but Bud didn't want any of that on tape.

One of Millie's stories that didn't get on the tape concerned a pay-off man from the city, who visited them. When they had finished their business, Bud and Millie asked if he wanted a drink, and they were able to provide him with almost any kind of liquor that he wished.

After a few drinks, he confided that he had a few bottles of bathtub gin in the car, an Auburn, which he had brought down to give to the provincials, and he was really amazed to find that they had better stock, a more variety of high quality liquor than he had ever encountered in his life.

And that's all that we were able to put on this tape.)